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\$ 20 million in grants trims gap for state labs

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Grants of more than \$ 20 million from the National Institutes of Health will draw Oklahoma closer to the national average in biomedical research funding for state laboratories, officials announced Thursday.

The money recently awarded to the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center and the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation will boost efforts to make biotechnology a force in the state's economy.

Money from the two grants will be split among biomedical researchers at the University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University and the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation.

The OU Health Sciences Center won \$ 9.1 million under the National Institutes of Health's Institutional Development Award program. The Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation will get \$ 11.5 million under the program.

The Health Sciences Center grant will establish a center devoted to examining how infectious organisms cause disease and how people respond to infection. Much of the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation's grant will fund four teams investigating autoimmune diseases, cancer and cardiovascular diseases. The money will help several young scientists who are establishing research programs in the state, said OU researcher David Dyer, who will oversee the OU grant.

About eight researchers will receive funds initially, but Dyer hopes as many as 16 will benefit from the \$ 4 million in annual funding over the next five years.

The funds will help entice young researchers who might otherwise overlook Oklahoma.

"Oklahoma is a wonderful place to live, but it's hard to recruit people to move here," he said

Oklahoma now has about 150 biomedical researchers. Donald Capra, Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation president, hopes to double that number within the next seven years with the grants' help.

The program is intended for states historically underfunded by the National Institutes of Health, said Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Warr Acres, whom officials credit with increasing federal money for Oklahoma biomedical laboratories.

Oklahoma lags behind the national average in per capita funding

from the National Institutes of Health, receiving \$ 10.57 per capita. The national average is \$ 41.10 per capita, according to 1999 figures.

Istook said the state pays more money in taxes than it gets back in research grants.

The federal government spends \$ 12 billion for medical research, but Oklahoma is among 26 states that share just 7 percent of that budget, **Istook** said. The other 24 states share more than \$ 11 billion.

"Oklahoma is among the half battling over crumbs," **Istook** said.

Frank Waxman, administrator with the state Regents for Higher Education, said the \$ 20 million will increase the state's per capita funding by about a dollar.

"That doesn't sound like much, and we're still a long way from the national average, but as they say, we have to take small steps," said Waxman, director of the state Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research.

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